

# “So Easily Confused”

Exodus 19:16-20<sup>1</sup>

Do any of you recognize what I’m holding in my hand? It’s obviously a bell, but it’s a particular kind of bell. This is a “bear bell.” I wore it some years ago when Nathan and I were backpacking in the high country around Vail, Colorado. We were in bear country, and I really didn’t want to meet any bears when I was in their territory.

The outfitters told us that metal-on-metal is a sound that doesn’t occur in Nature, and so when bears hear it, they’re alerted to the presence of humans, whom they normally prefer to avoid. We were told that if we wore the bells, we wouldn’t see any bears . . . but we wouldn’t see any other wildlife, either. Seemed like a good trade to me!

Well, in the passage of Scripture that sets the stage for our thought this morning, there was another sound that conveyed important information. Israel was camped at the base of Mt. Sinai, and on the third day of their encampment, they were awakened at dawn by a violent earthquake. The top of the mountain was covered with fire and smoke, and they heard a long, loud blast from a ram’s horn. The horn blast grew louder and louder until it became almost deafening.

Now the people knew the sound of a ram’s horn. As far as they knew, only humans could make such a sound, but no human could make a sound that loud . . . and they were afraid. Moses spoke to God, who was the Source of the sound, and God thundered His reply for all to hear, calling Moses to the top of the mountain (Exodus 19:1-20).

As you know, Nathan now lives in Portland, Oregon, and on a clear day he can see Mount St. Helens. Would you have wanted to climb Mount St. Helens as it prepared to erupt? I don’t think I would have! This was rather like that. And while the thought is fearsome, most of us have probably yearned from time to time for a powerful, awesome encounter with God. That’s what happened to Moses on the mountain, and that’s the background for our journey today.

This morning we’re going to take a second look at Exodus as we continue our overview journey through the Bible. You can remember the outline of Exodus in three words: the Passover; the Red Sea; and Mt. Sinai. Actually, there are only two themes in Exodus. These themes make their first appearance here, but they are in fact the two themes that organize the whole biblical story: **personal transformation** and **community transformation**; **deliverance** and **gathering**; **evangelism** and **community**. These are the Big Two.

Moses was on the mountain for well over a month, and the people below had no idea what was going on up there. They concluded—and you and I probably would have, too—that Moses had died up there, and that was, of course, a problem. It had only been three months since Israel had crossed the Red Sea, and they were still trying to figure out what was going on with this trip into the wilderness.

So, when Moses failed to come back down the mountain in what seemed like a reasonable amount of time, the people went to Moses’ brother, Aaron, who was second in command: “*Look,*” they said, “*make us some gods who can lead us. This man Moses, who brought us here from Egypt, has disappeared. We don’t know what has happened to him*” (Exodus 32:1). And so Aaron forged the famous “golden calf” to serve as a God-substitute for the people. But before we jump on the Israelites too hard for such surprising faith confusion, we need to realize that you and I do similar things pretty often.

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<sup>1</sup> A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on June 2, 2019.

Some years ago, Jill and I were traveling to Kentucky for some purpose I've now forgotten. We had left late in the day, as we often do, and found darkness falling around us while we were still in the mountains. We decided to try a "short cut," and turned north onto a road we had never used before. About an hour later we found ourselves back at the same exit from which our "short cut" had begun—we had traveled in a circle!

I had a rudimentary GPS receiver, but the screen wasn't illuminated, so I had turned it off. Jill and I had experienced what usually happens to persons who are lost in the wilderness if they have no external source of guidance: they become confused and travel in circles.

The Ten Commandments that God gave Moses on the mountain, as well as the five books of the Law that God gradually gave Moses in the Tent of Meeting, were given to serve as external guidance to get the people to the Promised Land. And, while God really did intend to give Israel some real estate, God had a deeper purpose in mind. Little by little, God's purpose was—and is—to so reveal God's own heart to humankind that we come to love God passionately . . . because God is passionately in love with us!

You have a modern version of the Ten Commandments in your worship order.<sup>2</sup> The Bible tells us that these Commandments have been given for our own good (Deuteronomy 10:13), and if we understand them correctly, we can see that this is true. Quite often, though, we misunderstand God's "external guidance" as a burden that restricts and constricts our lives rather than opening us up to abundant life.

The truth is, though, that God's principles for living, whether the Ten Commandments, the Sermon on the Mount, or in the Bible as a whole, are intended to function like a GPS receiver that keeps us headed in the right direction; like rods that guide the growth of a young tree; like a fence that protects us from a huge precipice; like the tracks on which a train can run. God's purpose isn't to restrict our gladness and joy. God's purpose is to make gladness and joy possible.

God is trying to tell us that traveling any path other than the one God has marked out leads in the end to heartache and destruction. As the Bible tells us, "*There is a path before each person that seems right, but it ends in death*" (Proverbs 16:25). Our enemy, Satan, is a master at "bait and switch." All that glistens is not gold.

Think for a moment about someone whom you love. What do you do that demonstrates your love for this person? I'll bet that you enjoy spending time with him and make time to be with her. I'll bet that you go to some length to stay in heart connection with him and to stay in phone or email contact with her. I'll bet that you willingly put your own interests aside quite often in order to do what pleases your loved one. I'll bet that you give considerable thought to what you get her for her birthday or for him on your anniversary. And I'll bet that the amount of time or money required to accomplish these things doesn't matter to you very much. Why? Because you love this person and deeply want to know her, to please him. Love is very generous.

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1. <sup>2</sup> No matter what anybody tells you, there is only one God.
  2. You're going to end up being really unhappy if you worship another god besides me.
  3. A person's name represents who they are. I respect your name, and I expect you to respect mine.
  4. I'm giving you one whole day off every week. Enjoy!
  5. I've given your parents the responsibility of raising you. They really do have the authority to do that.
  6. Don't kill each other.
  7. Don't do sexual stuff you know you shouldn't be doing.
  8. Don't take things from each other without asking.
  9. Tell the truth.
  10. You may like what your friends have, but get your own stuff.

Now let's change the focus just a bit and think for a moment about our relationship with God rather than our relationship with other people. How much time do you spend every day in conversation with God through study and prayer? How faithful are you to worship with God's family somewhere every week? How much of your income do you give to God's purposes through His Church?

Persons who are in love do whatever it takes to be with and to please their beloved. People who are resistant to spending time with God and with God's people, people who find themselves begrudging any significant contribution to those causes that are dear to God's heart, don't have a Law problem—they have a love problem.

This is where we tend to get confused. When we don't know God any better than Israel did at Sinai, it's really hard to get a handle on this "love thing" with God. In the beginning, the fact that God is Spirit, not something nice and tangible and tame—like a golden calf—throws us off. It's a lot easier to fix our affection on things or persons we can touch and smell and see, and it's pretty easy to become confused and think that life is about pretty people and pretty toys.

William Wordsworth wrote, "The world is too much with us; late and soon, getting and spending, we lay waste our powers." Yes, the world is too much with us. Getting and spending, it is so easy to become confused and to give our hearts away to things that will not last.

I've been reminded of this over the years in my relationship with automobiles. We each have our own weaknesses, and one of mine has tended to be cars. I don't buy fancy cars, but it has still always been pretty easy for a car to become more important in my affection than it should be. What kinds of things get your heart confused?

Many years ago, a wealthy family brought their teen-age daughter to me hoping that I could "fix" her deteriorating behavior. After a few weeks I asked the young woman's parents to come in for a session, and I told them, "I'm afraid that your daughter's problem is . . . you. You've let your properties and your radio stations become more important in your heart than your love for your daughter, and her behavior is a noisy protest at being ejected from your affection." That wasn't what they wanted to hear, of course. It's so easy to become confused.

We can become confused not only by letting world-stuff become too important to us, but also by doing the right things for the wrong reasons or in the wrong way. When you come to worship, do you come to watch and observe, or do you come to release your spirit in passionate love for God? When you read the Bible, do you force yourself to read words that mean nothing to you or do you read the Bible *as a passionate love letter from God to you*? When you give time or money to God's Kingdom, do you do it out of a sense of guilt or obligation or with delight at being able to please the One you love by caring for causes He cares about?

When you enjoy the glory of mountains or mountain lakes and streams, when you revel in the sun and surf at the beach, do you receive these as love-gifts from God? When you enjoy a fine evening of food and friends, are you aware that these, too, are love-gifts from your heavenly Father?

When you're having a difficult day, or when you or someone you love is faced with suffering and pain, are you able to remember that nothing can ever separate you from God's love? The Bible says that "*Death can't, and life can't. The angels can't, and the demons can't. Our fears for today, our worries about tomorrow, and **even the powers of hell can't keep God's love away***" (Romans 8:38).

When you know that you've done something that has broken God's heart, are you able to remember that even so, your Father is watching and loving and yearning for you to come home?

Do you remember that if you return to ask God's forgiveness, your Father will run to you and will embrace you with love, compassion, and the forgiveness you seek (Luke 15:20)?

I'm probably communicating this all very poorly. What I'm trying to say is that the message of the Ten Commandments is not really about law at all, but about love. **The whole point of the Bible is to help you know how much God loves you**, to give guidance about how to experience the joyful life God has planned for you, and to show you how to fall in love with God!

As I try so feebly to put the unspeakable into words, I agree with Paul that "*I am jealous for you with the jealousy of God himself. For I promised you as a pure bride to one husband, Christ. But I fear that somehow you will be led away from your pure and simple devotion to Christ, just as Eve was deceived by the serpent [and as Israel was deceived by the golden calf]*" (2 Corinthians 11:2-3).

Jesus told us that the Ten Commandments—and indeed all the rest of the Bible—could be summarized in just two phrases: **Love God** with all of your heart, soul, mind and strength; and **love your neighbor** as yourself (Matthew 22:37-40). My friend, do you yearn for a powerful, awesome, transforming encounter with God, for an experience of God after which you will never be the same again? **Well, you really can get there from here, and the path you take is love.**